

A Publication of St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired

2025 Visionary Gala

A special evening was in store as guests arrived for the Society's annual Visionary Gala: Visions in Black and White on Saturday, April 26, at the Hilton St. Louis Frontenac Hotel. More than 250 guests donned in black and white attire participated in this celebration to raise awareness of the Society's mission, celebrate our clients' successes in achieving their goals, and raise funds in support of vital programs and services.

The Visionary Gala evening included a cocktail reception, dinner, musical performances, silent and live auctions, and the "Be a Visionary" paddle raise. Local Fox 2 News anchor and journalist, Jasmine Huda, served as Gala emcee, and the evening also featured an inspiring performance by Holly Connor, a vocalist, actor, and musician studying Vocal Performance at Webster University. Connor, who is blind and has autism, dazzled the audience with her performance of a trio of songs and her work to advance awareness and inclusion in the arts.

Gala Co-Chairs Kim and Scott Drost thanked everyone who assisted in planning and supporting the event. Society's Board Chair, Elizabeth Kauffman, conveyed her appreciation to the Gala guests for their participation, generosity, and commitment.

This year's Visionary Gala also marked the centennial of the Leslie Dana Gold Medal that was presented during the evening program to J. William Harbour, MD.

Dr. Harbour is a North American/U.S.-based ophthalmologist, ocular oncologist and cancer researcher. He is Chair of the Department of Ophthalmology at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas, specializing in ocular oncology. While Dr. Harbour's home is in the Dallas, Texas, area, St. Louis is also a place he knows well as his research training in molecular oncology was here at Washington University.

He has trained many residents and fellows and has pioneered new surgical methods in fine needle biopsy, laser treatment, and brachytherapy of ocular tumors.

Dr. Harbour is the 71st recipient of the Leslie Dana Gold Medal, which has been awarded by SLSBVI since 1925 to honor and recognize long meritorious service for the conservation of eyesight, research and instruction in ophthalmology, social service for control of eye diseases, or special discoveries in the conservation of vision.

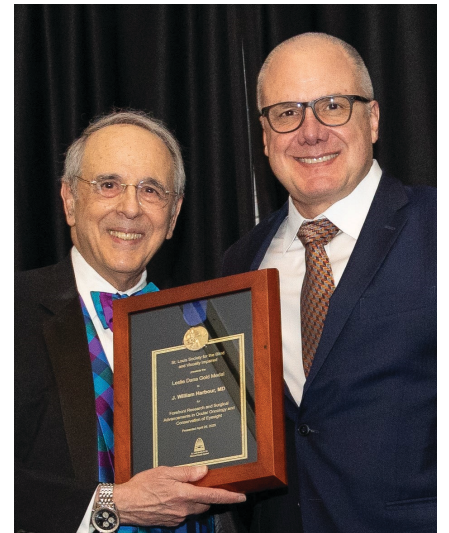
Also during the Gala evening, the Society's Community Light Award was presented to Brenda Wendling, MSW, LCSW. The Community Light Award honors individuals and organizations in the greater St. Louis region whose work has made immeasurable impact in the lives of people who are blind or visually impaired.

Wendling's career in social work includes nearly 25 years with SLSBVI where she served as the organization's Director of Adult Services until her retirement in 2023. She returns often to the Society as a volunteer.

The Visionary Gala included silent and live auctions, featuring everything from a private wine tasting to fabulous trips to Colorado. SLSBVI President and CEO Sharon Mertzlufft shared



Scott and Kim Drost
(Gala Co-Chairs)



Dr. James Bobrow and
Dr. J. William Harbour
(Leslie Dana Gold Medal)



Kim and Scott Drost, and Brenda Wendling (Community Light Award)



Carolyn Belden, Karen Kauffman and Board Chair, Elizabeth Kauffman



Jasmine Huda, Emcee



Sharon Mertzlufft, President

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2025 Visionary Gala

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her appreciation for the success of the Visionary Gala evening, emphasizing the importance of charitable contributions and fundraising events in the Society’s ability to provide a broad range of services to more than 1,300 clients annually.

“To all of you here tonight and the many individuals, foundations, businesses and organizations that support the Society’s mission throughout the year, I convey our clients’ and our team’s infinite gratitude for your commitment, and I ask for your continued support. With our clients, team and the St. Louis community working together, tremendous impact is achieved,” Mertzlufft said.



Dr. Paul Tesser (far left) and guests enjoy the evening.



Holly Connor, Entertainment



Dr. and Mrs. Bradley Smith

Meet Society’s Newest Board Member: Doug Tracy



Doug Tracy has joined the St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired governing board. Doug is the President and CEO of Cuivre River Electric Cooperative (CREC) headquartered in Troy, Missouri. He has been with CREC for over 21 years.

Doug received his Master of Business Administration (MBA) from Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Missouri, and a Bachelor of Business Administration in Accounting at Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas.

Doug has a heart for volunteering and also serves on the Board of Boone Center, Inc. / BCI Packaging, which employs people with disabilities. He has been a member of the BCI Board since July 2023.

Join us in welcoming Doug to the SLSBVI Board of Directors.

THANK YOU TO THE 2025 VISIONARY GALA LEADERSHIP AND SPONSORS

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Dr. Erin Cleary Sullivan and Mr. Kevin Sullivan



Please save the Date: 2026 Visionary Gala will be April 18, 2026.

Client Spotlight: Bill Preiss



“I’m very fearful of vision loss.” Those were the first words that Bill Preiss said to a social worker at St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired in 2019 when he was referred to us by his ophthalmologist due to cone-rod dystrophy, a condition that causes progressive vision loss. After 20 years in real estate sales and the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic, Bill felt even more afraid of what to expect.

“It’s a very scary thing when you lose your sight,” he said recently. “You don’t know what direction to turn in. What might be very small to someone else, to someone who is losing their sight, it’s huge.”

Bill was hesitant to visit the Society at first. Sometimes, individuals who are losing their vision see our name and think they are not yet at the point in needing services. SLSBVI treats the client from the beginning of vision loss through each stage. “I am so glad I made that first visit,” Bill added.

From the first comprehensive vision exam in the Drews Low Vision Clinic at the Society to learning assistive technology, Bill has flourished over the challenges that have faced him. The Society’s services have helped Bill to understand the diagnosis, and he knows what to expect. “I was introduced to assistive technology equipment, including how to use the accessibility features on a laptop and an iPad. I also learned a lot from the kitchen setup. Society has done a great job instructing clients in using their own kitchens at home.”

Bill says he can see the Society becoming the go-to place for eye conditions and can’t imagine what people would do without us. “I experienced a difficult situation where I needed to ask someone for help. I frankly felt a little embarrassed. It’s the stigma of blindness being a disability rather than a lifestyle. So, how do you overcome that? That’s a great question... I think the answer is familiarity with the process.”

That process involves not just coming in for one appointment but continuing the entire journey. When Bill needs help, he knows where to come. Six years ago, Bill was fearful of losing his sight. Now he is saying, “The Society is amazing. It’s an unbelievable service offered in the St. Louis region.”

From No Interest in Science to Teaching and Practicing Optometry: Kate Boland, O.D.

That title perfectly describes Dr. Kate Boland’s path in choosing her career.

Dr. Boland has been seeing clients at St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired for more than 20 years. When she graduated from high school and started her college years, Dr. Boland was not sure what she wanted to do but was certain she wanted nothing that involved science or teaching.

“Optometry wasn’t on my radar until one of my good friends went to optometry school. I sat as a guinea pig for several labs and fell in love with the topics,” said Dr. Boland.

Dr. Boland earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Benedictine College and a Doctor of Optometry degree from the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL) College of Optometry. She is the coordinator for the courses in Low Vision Rehabilitation and Geriatrics at UMSL. Dr. Boland will retire from the University in September, yet will continue her optometry practice with the Society, seeing clients in our Drews Low Vision Clinic three days per week.

She fell into teaching because a faculty member at UMSL College of Optometry was leaving, so they asked if Dr. Boland would be available to teach the introductory course. After attending several workshops and conferences, she knew that teaching low vision rehabilitation was the specialty for her.

Dr. Boland worked with UMSL’s Gerontology Department doing research regarding driving and vision impairment. She has worked on research involving how carotenoid supplements affect light sensitivity. All this has played a part in bringing Optometry students to the Society for training in providing low vision exams and everything that entails.

Dr. Boland said, “I really feel that the low vision specialty leads them to look at the person, instead of just making sure they know optometry concepts...It reminds them of why they wanted to become an OD.”

She and her husband just celebrated their 38th wedding anniversary, and they have two grandchildren with another on the way.



Occupational Therapy Intern: Rachael Apter

Earlier this year, the Society hosted our first Occupational Therapy intern from Washington University, Rachael Apter. Rachael will soon graduate from Washington University with a Doctorate in Occupational Therapy.



Rachael has been visually impaired since birth, and she knows first-hand the challenges of navigating life with low vision. She said, “I was interested in doing something in the medical field, and I was also interested in doing advocacy work specifically around disability advocacy and policy. I thought Occupational Therapy was a good combination of the two interests. I like how with OT you can stay with the clients and see the progress and impact they are making.”

When asked where she sees herself in five years, Rachael shared that she is really interested in Assistive Technology (AT) which is the focus of her doctoral capstone work this summer. She is very excited about the technology that is available to the visually impaired and sees this aspect of vision rehabilitation services as part of her professional focus in the future.

“Society has an entire room dedicated to electronic magnifiers of different sizes and a variety of text to speech products, which can read things, recognize money, and recognize faces. I’m also really excited about Meta glasses, which are a really good example of how technology can benefit everyone. These glasses weren’t designed originally as a product to help the blind and low vision community, but then we sort of adapted that and said look at how AI can help us too.”

Society has taught her a lot about working with adults. Rachael said, “The last place I worked at was a school system. It’s interesting to see the difference between working with adults versus kids. One of the things I really like about this setting is that most of the time, adults are motivated to improve their functioning and are excited to learn about different devices and strategies that can help improve their independence.” She laughed and added, “It’s hard to motivate a kid sometimes.”

For now, Rachael intends to stay in the low vision field after graduation, specifically doing school-based occupational therapy.

Just What Have Our Clients Been Up To?

The past several months have been filled with activities in the community for the Society’s clients. These excursions have been made possible through the generosity of a recreational grant from the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis (RAC) and support from other donors.

October 9, 2024: Frank Lloyd Wright House Tour

The Frank Lloyd Wright House in Ebsworth Park is a unique and significant residence designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, widely recognized as the greatest American architect of the 20th century. Society clients and their guests enjoyed a comprehensive tour of the home, marveling at its unique angles and furnishings.



October 23, 2024: Laumeier Sculpture Park Tour

Laumeier presents sixty works of large-scale outdoor sculptures in a 105-acre park and also features bronze maquettes with Braille to help visitors who are visually impaired navigate the outdoor galleries. Park docents led a walking tour of the park for our clients and their guests.

November 19, 2024: Swing Dance Lessons

An instructor from Dance Pizazz offered a 45-minute Swing Dance Lesson for clients at the Society. Located in St. Charles, Dance Pizazz offers ballroom, Latin and swing dance lessons and events.

During the holiday season, Society clients received free tickets to attend **A Beautiful Noise: The Neil Diamond Musical** in November at the Fox Theatre, and **A Celtic Women Christmas Symphony** in December at the Stifel Theatre.



In 2025, the adventures have continued:

Approximately twenty-five clients received tickets to enjoy the musical **Ain’t Too Proud: The Life and Times of the Temptations**, on May 10 at the Fox Theatre. This electrifying musical shares the story of the legendary group’s rise to prominence in the musical scene of the 1960s and 70s.

Cheering on the St. Louis Battlehawks

On Friday, May 18, the St. Louis Battlehawks football team generously treated several of Society’s clients and their guests to the Battlehawks Experience. This experience included tickets to the game and a High-5 Tunnel in which our clients greeted the players as they came out to the field for the game. The Society was featured in announcements and on the jumbotron at the start of the game.

More activities are currently underway and will be featured in Society’s fall/winter newsletter. **Stay tuned!**



Donor Spotlight - Board Member, Beverley Foster

Before Beverley Foster joined the Board of Directors of the St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired, she experienced the mission and services of our organization as a client.



Beverley Foster, Board Member

She describes the Society as “a tremendous and well-run organization that has served St. Louis for over one hundred years. I’m a client and I know what their services have done for me. It’s important for me to share with my community that the Society is open and welcoming to all!”

Beverley worked for nearly 30 years in sales training and marketing support with the Xerox corporation. In 1995, Stargardt Disease came calling. Stargardt’s is a genetic eye condition that affects the macula, the central part of the retina, leading to progressive vision loss. By 2004, the disease had progressed to the point where it was difficult for Beverley to continue in her career at Xerox, which led to her retirement from the company and a move to the St. Louis area to live closer to her daughter, son-in-law and grandson.

Beverley’s drive and ambition were not stolen by Stargardt’s, which is exactly why she and her daughter opened a commercial aeroponic tower farm in April 2024 which provides fresh basil for supermarkets and other food service companies.

Beverley said, “You know, I lived in the community, and I would often pass by the Society office. When the day came that I needed services, I made an appointment and came on in. I wasn’t the least bit hesitant, because the people here are awesome, very friendly, knowledgeable, and welcoming.”

Beverley feels that the Society is a personal resource for her to get the items that she needs from the Sight Solutions Shop and other assistance. She in turn shares our services with the wider minority community.

“At one of my appointments, I shared that I had been a member of the Board of Directors for the Center for the Visually impaired when I lived in Atlanta. I accepted the invitation to serve on the Society’s board because I want to continue encouraging others who are visually impaired to take advantage of the services here.”

She is not only committed to the Board of Society, but also highly involved in her community. Remember that statement we made earlier that Stargardts Disease could not steal her drive and ambition? She can tell you.

“I am also active in STL Village, which is an organization that supports older adults living in their own homes. I enjoy music, arts programs and other activities, and I am a member of Central Baptist Church.”

Beverley stated, “This is why I support St. Louis Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired. These are some of the friendliest and most welcoming people that you can find to work with. This organization has people who are committed to helping and making our lives better.”

THANK YOU!

The Society gratefully acknowledges philanthropic contributions received from October 2024 through May 2025

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Visionary
Gala

APRIL 18, 2026

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For more information, go to our website:
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